

Vocabulary Integration in a Content-Based International Business English Program

Integración del vocabulario en un programa de inglés para negocios internacionales basado en contenidos

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Abstract

Vocabulary instruction has an integral place in a content-based EFL course. Including an EFL component is especially important when the materials for a content-based course come from authentic sources written for English native speakers. This paper reflects on EFL vocabulary integration in a Business Communication course at a Colombian university.

Key Words: vocabulary; content-based instruction; course design; EFL.

Resumen

La instrucción en vocabulario ocupa un lugar integral en un curso de inglés como lengua extranjera basado en contenidos. La inclusión de un componente de inglés como lengua extranjera es especialmente importante cuando los materiales a usar en un curso basado en contenidos provienen de fuentes auténticas escritas para hablantes nativos de inglés. Este ensayo hace una reflexión sobre la integración del vocabulario en la instrucción de inglés como lengua extranjera en un curso de comunicación de negocios en una universidad colombiana.

Palabras Claves: vocabulario; instrucción basada en contenidos; diseño de cursos; EFL.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary instruction has an integral place in a content-based EFL course. Obviously, teaching content in English is the primary objective of a content-based course; in designing such a course, however, we must also be careful how we integrate an EFL component to best meet student needs. This inclusion of an EFL component is especially important when the materials for a content-based course are taken from authentic sources written for English native speakers. By conscientiously integrating an EFL component in our content-based courses, we recognize that, in most cases, we are not actually trained experts in the content area we are teaching, but rather we are experts in language teaching, and we aim to capitalize on this expertise. Regardless of whether it is designing a Business Communication course such as the one taught at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia (Bailey, Rey & Rosado, 2008) or it is designing a government first aid course such as the one taught to new migrants in Adelaide, Australia (Content-based, 2004), carefully balancing content area material and EFL material is key to content-based program success.

As EFL professionals, we must recognize that our primary role, even in a content-based course, is to improve our students' overall English-language abilities. As Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003, 6) argue: "content-based instruction aims at eliminating the artificial separation between language instruction and subject matter classes which exists in most educational

settings.” In content-based instruction, we strive to rid our programs of this false distinction between teaching language and teaching subject matter. We do not aim to teach one area or the other, but to seamlessly combine the two.

Cummins (1980, 1981, 1996) argues that there are two types of English proficiencies that EFL students need to develop. First, they must develop basic interpersonal conversational skills (BICS). These skills are necessary for face-to-face interactions that are based on context and they are not demanding cognitively. Here we refer to general conversational skills such as talking about ourselves and what we have been doing in recent days or years. According to Cummins, students in an academic EFL environment generally develop a high level of proficiency in this area within two or three years. The second set of skills students must develop relates to cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which is not as dependent on context and is part of content areas like math, science and business. Here we refer to functioning on a higher level in specialized content areas. According to Cummins, it takes longer, from five to seven years, for EFL students to develop these thinking skills. Therefore, when we are developing a content-based program, we must keep in mind that the basic interpersonal skills (BICS) are the foundation on which students’ cognitive proficiency skills (CALP) will be based.

COURSE SPECIFICS

The International Business English Program at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia is an example of a course with objectives that seemingly take into account this distinction between BICS and CALP. As described in Bailey, et. al (2008), the International Business Program at Universidad del Norte aims to take students to a C1 level of the Common European Framework. This program has eight levels, the first four of which are primarily EFL instruction and the second four of which are primarily content-based. In the first two levels (*Negocios Internacionales 1* and *Negocios Internacionales 2*), the textbook used is the pre-intermediate level of *Intelligent Business*, the authors of which state, regarding language development, that the goal of the theme-based book is to give students “ample opportunities to practise important grammar and vocabulary in both spoken and written contexts . . . (and) the career skills syllabus develops the key communicative language and strategies necessary to succeed in today’s work environment (Trappe & Tullis, 2006, 6). So we can see that even though a business-themed book is used, the first two levels are relatively traditional EFL courses focusing on BICS.

In the third and fourth levels (*Negocios Internacionales 3* and *Negocios Internacionales 4*), we begin to use a combination of authentic material and EFL material in these two courses that focus, respectively, on effective writing skills and on critical thinking skills. In these two levels, we still recognize that our students need BICS skills, but we begin to develop their CALP skills through the use of some authentic native-speaker texts. Students work through a variety of activities that combine the development of these two areas.

When the students complete the fourth level of the *Negocios Internacionales* stage, they are then ready to continue into the second stage of the program, the upper four levels: the content-based Business English program. It is important to note that regardless of how high of an English level an incoming student may have (having possibly lived abroad or studied at a truly bilingual high school), he or she must complete all four courses of this second phase. We believe that all students can benefit from learning the concepts taught in our content-based Business Communication program, and this is why nobody may opt out of these courses. The inclusion of

a vocabulary component in this second content-based phase will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

THE CONTENT-BASED PHASE

The Business English program at Universidad del Norte presently has four content-based business communication courses: Business English 1, Intercultural Communication; Business English 2, Advanced Written Communication; Business English 3, Advanced Oral Communication; and Business English 4, Communication & Professional Development. Professors of the Language Institute, with the assistance of an international consultant, designed each of these courses. Many of the materials used are original and designed by these professors, and they are combined with material from authentic sources, including US university business communications textbooks such as *Essentials of Business Communication* (Guffey, 2009).

As this advanced course drew its materials exclusively from authentic materials directed toward native speakers, we found that students were expressing a keen interest in developing their business vocabulary to better understand the texts that they were required to read. For this reason we developed vocabulary lists in each of these courses that would be used along with certain grammar materials, as an EFL component to these, otherwise, all content-based courses. Selecting what vocabulary to include, however, posed quite a challenge.

BUILDING VOCABULARY LISTS

As McCarthy (2003) states that there are three ways in which selection of vocabulary has been applied: (1) word frequency and range, (2) learnability, and (3) learners' needs. Syllabus designers have a number of lexical corpora they can use to develop their vocabulary lists. Trying to figure out how to take advantage of these corpora, however, can be a daunting task for a typical syllabus designer. The British National Corpus has over 100 million words and the Corpus of Contemporary American English lists an astounding 385 million words. Using word frequency seems like a logical starting point, but McCarthy warns that frequency lists need to be approached with caution and careful analysis. It turns out that some words for the same subject area are not used with the same frequency and words with a similar frequency are used in a variety of subject areas. So, the best we can do is somehow study a limited set of texts to see what the most frequently used words are in any subject area.

Learnability is the second way in selecting vocabulary lists. Here we refer to focusing on key areas that might cause a problem for students: the difference between *make* or *do*, the use of false cognates, etc. And the third way of selecting vocabulary, and the way we used in our advanced Business Communication program, is based on the identification of learners' needs. Being able to predict what vocabulary learners will need is important in deciding what to teach. As Allen (1983:90) states, equally important is "creating a sense of need for a word" and determining which words "are needed in connection with the students' particular academic interests."

For the selection of our vocabulary lists, we decided to first look at the materials we had at hand. We compiled our original list from several sources including the glossaries of the *Intelligent Business* series (Trappe, T. & Tullis G., 2006), the *Terminología Dinámica de las Nuevas Técnicas Comerciales*, (Bielsa, V.) and the online glossaries of such sources as *Business Week*, *The Washington Post* and The US Chamber of Commerce. As Bates (2008) suggests, vocabulary instruction should emphasize useful, high-frequency words rather than lists of rarely

used terms. In the development of our list, we strove to find such useful, high frequency words. Some likely sources turned out to be of limited help. For example, we consulted the University of Cambridge's online Business English Certificate (BEC) Preliminary Word List (2006), which, though excellent, did not meet our needs. For example, the first five terms on this list are "a.m., abbreviation, ability, about, above," which obviously are important words for all students to know, not just business students; however we assumed that by the time our students are in our context-based course, they should already know these words. Also, the BEC list did not include some terms that we, through intuition, determined our students would need: for example "mortgage, foreclosure, and bottom line."

So we were able to compile our vocabulary list based on the above-described method. Today, our next challenge is to determine how to better organize the delivery of this material. We need to provide context to our vocabulary lists because research overwhelmingly shows that students' vocabulary retention is increased with more contextual application (Glazer, 2005; Hui-Tzu, 2008). Providing this context has been our biggest challenge to date because some of our authentic materials will be changed from semester to semester to keep our program current and fresh, and if our vocabulary lists are based on specific readings, then every time we change our readings, we will have to change our lists.

As our vocabulary lists currently exist, the students receive three 44-word lists during each semester of the Business Communication program and they are tested on each of these three lists as part of their Vocabulary & Grammar Quizzes. We are working to find new ways to create context. One idea is to organize our lists by topic. Another possible way of creating context that we are considering is to develop an in-house online Business Glossary in which, each semester, students will add to the glossary and find real-world uses of the vocabulary terms in current book and periodical references.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of how we move forward with our vocabulary development, we have come to realize that the inclusion of an EFL component, be it vocabulary, grammar, style, or idiomatic expressions, will be key to our success in this advanced level content-based program. We are working together as a team to refine the EFL component of our courses so that our International Business students come away from our program with a Common European Framework level of C1 and a thorough understanding of the importance of effective written and oral communication skills in today's business world.

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BIODATA

Thomas Gardner holds a M.A. in Communication from Ohio University and has 17 years' experience teaching EFL at universities and in the private sector in the U.S., Venezuela, and Colombia.